

HANSEL AND GRETEL

Once upon a time there was a boy and a girl called Billy and Minnie Jones, and they lived in Birmingham, just like you and me. Billy was a big, lumpy, grinning boy, not quite ten, and his sister Minnie was a bit more than a year younger; because she was little and pretty and merry, she was mostly called Minnie Mouse. Their father was a mechanic, but he had been out of work for the best part of two years and had dropped out of his Union and out of the brass band he used to play in—it made him feel uncomfortable meeting the other chaps now he'd only got the one suit for Sundays and weekdays and he got to think everyone was staring at him at the band practise, so he stopped going. But he and another fellow had a bit of an allotment between them, and he spent a good lot of time down there. All the same, Mrs. Jones used to say he got that hungry after working that it wasn't worth it for the amount of vegetables he brought home.

Mrs. Jones was fed up. She couldn't help it. She'd had to make do all her life and it didn't seem somehow as if any of it had been worth living, especially the last six or seven years. She was a bit short-sighted too, but they couldn't afford glasses for her. So she was mostly cross to Billy and Minnie and they were frightened of her. Their father was nicer to them, especially when he'd made a bit, betting. He used to have a threepenny double most weeks, and sometimes it came off. Those days he used to bring back a penn'orth of mixed drops for the two children, and tell them stories; he told them fairy stories, like I'm telling you. They used to

sit on his knee, smelling his breath all beery like it was every time when he'd won, and suck their sweets, and listen to the stories. But mostly Mrs. Jones was crosser than ever those days.

One afternoon she went over to the shop at the corner to get some rice and dried beans on tick, and she left Billy and Minnie at home. She told Minnie to peel the potatoes and mind she peeled them thin, and she told Billy to get on with scrubbing the kitchen floor and mind he didn't use up the soap. And then she put on her coat which was one she'd got at the Church Jumble three years back, and used to belong to the vicar's mother, who was shorter and fatter than Mrs. Jones was, but somehow, what with Mr. Jones and the children, she'd never had time to alter it, and then she went out.

After a bit Billy looked up from the floor where he was kneeling to scrub on an old wad of newspapers, and he said: "Me knees is wet. Mum won't be back, not for hours. I don't like scrubbing, Min." "We've got to help Mum, ain't we?" said Minnie, going on with the potatoes, "or the P.A.C. man'll catch us." "Our Min, always going on about helping Mum!" said Billy. "Proper little angel, ain't you?" Minnie threw a potato at him and he jumped up and threw the wad of newspapers from the floor at her, and she squealed because it was all squashy and cold. Then the two of them fought, oh real wicked!—and they broke one of the knobs off the fender, though goodness knows how they did it, but there, us mothers know what real tigers a pair of kids can be!

Well after that they rolled about on the floor, scrapping and biting and tearing each other's clothes, and then Minnie bumped her head on the table leg and began crying. Then Billy got sorry

and gave her his dead frog that he'd got tied onto the end of a string and stuffed into his pocket—the nasty little thing—but there, you know what boys are—and they got playing with the dead frog, and Billy left off his scrubbing in the middle, and Minnie hadn't got half the potatoes done, and they were as happy as could be. And then all of a sudden Mrs. Jones came back from the shop.

She wasn't half wild with them when she saw the mess they'd got the place into, and how the floor wasn't near washed nor the potatoes near peeled, and she lammed into young Billy. He ducked under the table and she hit out, and she broke the milk jug. Now, the milk was what she'd been saving for the kids' supper—she'd done without it in her own tea for weeks now except on Sundays when she had a drop of condensed—and the jug was one she'd had for a wedding present and it belonged, as you might say, to the times when she'd thought life was worth living. And there it was all to bits on the floor, and a nasty mess to pick up, and those two kids were laughing as if it was all a joke, for breaking things mostly is a joke, to kids. So Mrs. Jones caught Billy by the collar and gave him a good smack on the face that set him off blubbering, and she shook Minnie till she'd shaken all the laughing out of her, and she called them names which I shan't repeat and which she was sorry for five minutes after, and she opened the front door and she shoved them both outside, telling them she couldn't bear the sight of them one minute longer, and she slammed it on them so that the wall shook and a bit of plaster came down off the corner, and that was another mess on the kitchen floor. And no more she could bear the sight of them just then, what with all she'd had to put up with, and seeing the gro-

ceries in the Co-op that she couldn't afford to buy for them, and having her jug broken. She didn't even try to clean it up; she just sat down by the table and let herself go slummocking all across it, and she cried and cried.

But Billy and Minnie, after the first minute or two, they didn't care. It all went off them like water off a duck's back. And off they went trotting and chattering, and along by the tram lines and under the railway arch, and past the sweet shop and past the fire station, and round the corner by the Red Lion where they hoped they might see their Dad, but they didn't, and past Mr. Butler the Pawnbroker's, which was a place they both knew pretty well, Friday evenings and Mondays, and past the chapel with the board outside about the Wrath to Come, and through the passage way and up, and so into Corporation Street itself. And there were all the gentlemen with white collars and shiny shoes and hats like the Prince of Wales, and all the ladies with real silk stockings and paint and powder on their faces, and the grand blue-chinned policemen to look after the ladies and gentlemen and make their big glossy motor-cars slide carefully along between the traffic signals this way and that. And Billy and Minnie watched the ladies and gentlemen going into the beautiful great shops and movie palaces that were just beginning to light up, all gay and golden, or with red and blue and green lights in tubes like tooth-paste. And they stuck their noses and dabbed their grubby fingers against the glass, and stared and pointed at the insides of the shops, that looked so warm and cosy and full of softness and brightness and safety.

But they weren't safe really, those shops. They weren't what they looked like. Things aren't, mostly. Because, after Billy and

Minnie had been standing there for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, who should come up to them but an old witch?

Of course, they didn't know she was a witch. And perhaps you or I wouldn't have known either. She was rather old, and she wore silk and a fur coat, very soft and warm, with another kind of fur for its collar, and she wore jewels on her ears and fingers and throat, though one didn't see them at first, because she wore gloves and kept the fur collar high over her neck, and she wore a hat with a bird's feather as bright and lovely as a fairy in it, and she stepped down carefully and circumspectly onto the pavement out of her Rolls-Royce. And she came up behind Billy and Minnie and smiled at them and said: "Now, my little dears, come along with me into the shop and I will buy you each a lovely present."

Both the children were a little bit frightened, but not frightened enough, so they went into the shop with the old witch, and they didn't dare to say a word to one another. It was all grand and huge and quiet, higher and more shining than the new Woolworth's, and full of things so beautiful and clean and new, that they could hardly breathe. They just didn't know what to choose. There were all sorts of toys and dolls and trains and teddy bears, more and bigger than they'd ever dreamt of, and they just gaped and the old witch watched them. At last Minnie suddenly made up her mind and chose a work-basket for her mother. It was ever such a beautiful work-basket, full of scissors and needles and every kind of thing, and a tape measure looking like a tiny apple and the thimble in real silver. You see, Minnie was sorry about the milk jug now, and she thought this would make up for it, and besides it would pawn for five shillings easy. But Billy was slow in making up his mind, and a bit dazed and stupid, and at last he

chose a train and rails, and it was done up in a box, and then he knew he'd really have liked a meccano set or a model sports car, only it was too late.

After that, the old witch bought them each a huge box of chocolates, pink ribbon for Minnie, blue ribbon for Billy, and they tucked in, and she watched them. And then all three of them got into the Rolls-Royce and it drove off, going so softly they couldn't have told they were moving. They sat one on each side of her, rolled up in a big rug, and every now and then she smiled and glanced and shifted a little, and you could just see the tip of her tongue showing between her lips, which were rather too pink and moist-looking for anyone her age. So they drove along through the lighted, crowded streets, and the policemen held up the traffic for them and the fur rug snuggled them down into the deep cushiony seat of the car.

And Minnie thought: "Serves Mum right if we *are* late—but she won't mind really, not when she sees this." And she held tight onto her lovely, knobbly parcel, and her tongue kept on licking little bits of chocolate and stuff out from between her teeth, but she knew the box wasn't half finished yet. There was only one thing that seemed a bit funny, and that was the kind of nasty green light that there was all round the chauffeur's cap and shoulders; you could see the shape of his ears against it, and somehow she didn't think they were at all a nice shape. As it grew darker she could see this light clearer and clearer, but she couldn't say anything to Billy, because he was sitting in the other corner of the seat, with the old witch between her and him.

And then she heard a whispering and rustling at her ear, and she looked round quietly, and who should she see but the little

animal which made the collar of the beautiful fur coat, watching her out of its bright, golden-dusky eyes and twitching its pretty sensitive whiskers. "You're Minnie Mouse, aren't you?" said the little animal, and she saw the white of its pointed teeth show against the soft dark of its fur.

"Yes," said Minnie, "but who ever are you?"

"I'm Sasha Sable," said the little thing, "and I'm here to warn you."

Minnie looked quickly up at the old lady's face. She was half turned away, towards Billy, and not noticing, and quite suddenly, and in spite of the work-basket and the chocolates, Minnie didn't like her at all. "What of?" whispered Minnie; "her?"

"Yes," said Sasha Sable, "she's a horrible witch. She had me killed to make into the collar of her coat. I was caught by the foot in one of her traps while I and my friends were jumping and dancing along over the snow. My friends ran away from the smell of iron and my blood and I was there three days trying to get out of the trap, and all the time the trap was crushing my foot and the cold was biting at my wound. I tried to gnaw my foot off to get out of her trap, Minnie, but I couldn't; I stayed there squealing or dead-quiet till the fourth day, and then one of her slaves came and killed me, and skinned my fur off my poor body. But to-day I have been allowed to come alive and warn you against my mistress the witch."

Minnie put up her hand softly and stroked the soft paw of Sasha Sable that had been crushed in the trap and whispered to him to go on.

"It was the same for the other animals in her coat," said Sasha Sable, "we were all made to suffer pain and death for her. And the

fairy bird in her hat, he was snared between one flower and another, and his neck wrung. Do you know about the silk she's wearing, Minnie Mouse? There were little children out in China, and she trapped them like she trapped the rest of us, and every day they had to dip their hands into boiling water to fetch out the cocoons of the dead silk-worms to be spun into her dresses."

"What ever happened to the children in the end?" said Minnie, going all shivery.

"They died, mostly. That's what witches do with children. They kill them and eat them and turn them into spiders or bake them into gingerbread. She's got slaves all over the world. She's got brown slaves who dive into the sea to pull Jane Oyster out of her bed and cut her open to steal her pearls, and sometimes they get caught by the great clams and octopuses and drowned; she's got black slaves who work in the hot diamond pits for her. And here too, she has her slaves at work the whole time, making things for her and carrying them to her house. The P.A.C. man is one of her slaves, Minnie; he's got to do it because she makes him. And now I've warned you so you'd better get away before she gets you too."

"But—" said Minnie. Only just then the old witch turned her head and as she did so Sasha Sable flattened out, and his eyes were only beads and his paws went limp and dangled, and he was just the collar of the fur coat. The witch smiled at Minnie, but Minnie ducked her head over the parcel; she couldn't smile back. She was thinking of the fairy tales her Dad used to tell her on lucky nights, and what the witches in the fairy tales used to do to children. She remembered knives and cauldrons and fires waiting, and how the children in the stories were fattened up to be

eaten, and she wished she'd thought of that before starting to eat the chocolates, and she felt a bit sick.

Now the Rolls-Royce was sliding along a wide road, with big houses on each side, set far apart from one another in gardens, and by and bye they turned into a drive and the headlights of the car lighted up thick, spiky looking, dangerous bushes which parted in front of them, and they came to the stone steps and the wide front door of the witch's house. It was quite dark by now, but the headlights of the Rolls-Royce shining along the house showed Minnie that it was built of solid gold and silver, only both beautiful metals had been tarnished and dirtied over by the smoke of the Midlands, and ivy had been trained up the golden pillars to make them look more respectable. A butler in a black coat opened the great front door and the old witch walked in; and behind her came Billy and Minnie, hand in hand. Minnie hadn't yet had time to explain to Billy what Sasha Sable had told her, and he wanted to go in; he thought there would be more trains and chocolates and meccano sets. Inside, the gold and silver house was papered with pound notes and ten shilling notes, and the drawing-room with crossed cheques for a thousand pounds apiece. The kitchen and pantry were papered in stripes with sheets of stamps, and the passages with postal orders; the lamp-shades were made of Bank of England five-pound notes, and the thick rustling carpets of dollars and francs and marks and lire and pesetas and yen and I don't know what-all else. All that was the magic the old witch used when she wanted to bewitch people and kill them or enslave them or turn them into lizards and spiders and toads.

Suddenly Billy said: "I want to go home. Oo, I do want to go home to Dad and Mum!" But the old witch said: "Not to-night, my dear, too late for little boys to go out now. To-morrow perhaps." And Minnie pinched him to stop him answering back, for she was afraid that if he did they would both get snapped up at once. Then the butler in the black coat took them into a room where they found a lovely supper of cake and milk and fruit, and Billy began to gobble it up, but Minnie didn't want to. They tried to talk to the butler, but it was no good; the witch had made him dumb with her enchantments.

At last he went away and then Minnie whispered to Billy just what Sasha Sable had told her. "Oh Min, whatever shall we do?" said Billy, and he began to cry, but Minnie had more sense than that. So when he stopped crying, they peeped out of the room and went creeping about the house, trying to find a way out. But all the doors and windows were fastened up by great heavy golden bars, that they couldn't begin to lift, and once or twice when they looked quietly round a corner, there'd be someone standing with his back to them at the end of a corridor, and he'd have that nasty green light round his head and shoulders, the same as the chauffeur had.

Once they came into the room where the old witch was sitting, playing Patience beside a nice warm fire. But when they looked, they saw that it wasn't good Derby brights on the fire, but a heap of blackened bones that the pretty flames were dancing about among. And they saw it wasn't a pussy-cat on the hearth-rug, but a small tiger that was watching them. And they saw she wasn't playing Patience with ordinary cards, because the clubs were fac-

tories and rows of little houses, and the spades were acres of land, and the diamonds were stocks and shares, and the hearts were people's lives, so whenever she discarded a heart it bled a little, and the blood dripped off the table, down its jade and ivory legs, and the cat that was really a tiger, only worse, lapped up the blood. And the witch looked up from her Patience and patted their heads, and seemed very satisfied, and then she told them to run along to bed.

So the dumb butler in the black coat took them to another beautiful room where there were two little beds with knobs of rubies and emeralds, and two little suits of pyjamas with a £ sign embroidered on the pocket. Neither of them had ever had a bed like that; it reminded Minnie of the week she'd been in hospital with her bad leg, only it was even grander, and the sheets whiter, and the blankets softer. So they got into the pyjamas, which were like what they'd seen in shop windows, and danced about in them a bit, only the embroidery on the pocket seemed to burn rather and gave them a pain over the heart. So they got into bed, but they were afraid to talk to one another, because they thought that the emerald and ruby knobs might be listening.

The next thing that happened was that they heard steps outside and in came the old witch to tuck them up and say good-night. She kissed Billy who was just lying staring at her, but Minnie was pretending to be asleep and had burrowed her face down under the blanket, so the witch couldn't get at her. When she went out, she put out all the lights, except for a little lamp that was made to look like a lighthouse, and on the very top of it was an old-fashioned golden sovereign, like I remember when I was a kid myself years and years ago, but you don't. And the horrid thing was

that every now and then a pretty pale moth would come fluttering up and bang against the light, and burn its wings. Not that moths don't do that anywhere where there's a light, let alone in witches' houses, but somehow there were more moths in that room than there'd any right to be in a city like Birmingham. And hearing the moth's wings sizzle and the soft plopping down of their silly little bodies as they fell and died, was more than Minnie could stand. She'd been wondering hard how to do in the witch, remembering the way the children in the fairy tales used to manage it, tipping her up into her own oven and turning her into gingerbread—only there didn't seem to be any oven here and she didn't know what else would do. So now, what with lying awake, and watching the nasty little lighthouse lamp and the glitter on the ruby and emerald knobs, and hearing the sizzle and drop of the burnt moths, one after the other, she began to call in a whisper for Sasha Sable to come and help her. But as to Billy, after the witch had kissed him he went to sleep and began to dream about more and better trains and model aeroplanes and parlour-games and baby cinema sets and small-scale jazz bands and all the other things that the witch had put into his head with her enchantments.

So now it was only Minnie Mouse who lay awake, biting her fingers and whispering for Sasha Sable and feeling the £ mark on her pyjama pocket burning and biting her. She was, as you might say, all alone, for that snoring little Billy wasn't any comfort. And first it struck the half hour and then it struck the hour, and then there came a pattering and rustling of little furry feet, and all of a sudden the lighthouse went out and the ruby and emerald knobs stopped glittering, and Minnie knew that Sasha Sable had come alive again.

“Minnie Mouse, Minnie Mouse!” said the little dusky beast, “did you let her kiss you?”

“No!” said Minnie. “Oh, where are you?” And she reached out in the dark till her fingers fell on and fondled his soft warm fur.

“Then you can get away,” said Sasha Sable. “You’ve only got to follow me and I’ll show you the back door that they always forget to bolt.”

Minnie jumped out of bed; she was beginning to be able to see in the dark. She pulled off the pyjamas and got back as quick as she could into her old patched vest and her serge knickers and frock, and her socks that were more holes and darns than anything else, and her old black shoes that had come from the Church Jumble, the same as her mother’s coat and about as bad a fit—but she didn’t mind that now. Then she began to shake her brother. “Billy!” she said, “Wake up, can’t you! Oh Billy, wake up!”

But it was no good. Billy slept like a log, and when she bent right over close to him she could see he was smiling in a silly sort of way. Sasha Sable jumped onto the bed. “There’s only one thing to be done,” he said, “or else we’ll never wake him.” And he bit Billy’s finger with his sharp white teeth and then stuffed his tail into Billy’s mouth to stop him making a noise crying. But that woke Billy up all right, though at first he didn’t like being woke, for he’d been in the middle of dreaming that he’d got a bicycle and was riding it up and down an enormous shop full of toys and games, choosing things as he went along. Still, after he’d rubbed his eyes for a minute or two he began to see sense, and Minnie pulled off his pyjama jacket and helped him into his things. “Come along,” said Sasha Sable.

Minnie was just coming when she stumbled over her parcel. "Oh!" she said, "can I take my work-basket?"

Sasha Sable made a grumbling noise between his teeth. At last he said: "Very well. But mind, you can't take the chocolates, Minnie Mouse, and that silly brother of yours can't take his parcel; it's too big." And he looked round over his shoulder and said: "If you whine, Billy, I'll bite you again. So there."

Then Minnie opened the door of the room and they all three went out. Sasha Sable trotted in front of them down the passage, which was still lighted up, though there was no one about. Seeing him like that, so small and pretty and unafraid, made Minnie stop being frightened too. She bent down and whispered to him: "Can't Billy and me kill the old witch? The kids in the fairy tales always do."

"Not yet," said Sasha Sable, cocking up his muzzle and bright eyes at her. "Next time, perhaps. If you're a good girl and remember all about it and never let the witch get at you again." And then he added: "You might as well take one of those lamp-shades away with you. Your Dad and Mum'll thank you, and perhaps it'll help you to remember."

So Minnie and Billy stripped off the Bank of England notes that made the lamp-shade and put them into their pockets, and then they followed Sasha Sable down some steps and round a corner and so to a little door that seemed to be made of ordinary wood instead of gold or silver. They opened it quite easily. "Good-bye, Sasha Sable," said Minnie, and held out her arms.

He jumped into them and nestled all soft against her neck and chin for a minute. "Good-bye, Minnie Mouse," he said, "I must go back or she'll miss me from the collar of her grand coat. But re-

member, when the time comes, if you want help in the witch's house, there'll always be me—or someone else." And then he jumped down and scuttled off into the house, and they shut the door carefully after him.

They ran down the path and through the shrubbery; the spiky nasty evergreens tried to catch at them, but all they did was to tear a hole in Billy's coat, and then they were out in the road and standing under an ordinary street-lamp, and very sleepy. Billy's finger was still bleeding where Sasha Sable had bitten him, and neither of them had a hanky to tie it up, but he sucked it and said he was all right, and was a bit nice to Minnie, because now she was tired and crying a little and saying she'd never get home.

Still, they did get home all right, and not more than an hour later, for when they got down onto the main road again, what should they do but get a lift from a lorry that was going their way. Whether Sasha Sable had anything to do with that, I don't know. Most likely he hadn't; a lorry driver'll always give you a lift if you ask him nicely and he isn't being speeded up so that he daren't stop—and his boss isn't looking. When he put them down they'd only a quarter of an hour's walk home, but all the same Mr. and Mrs. Jones were in an awful state when they got back. They'd been round to the police and the hospital and everything and both of them burst out crying and hugging them, especially Mrs. Jones, she felt that bad about having turned them out earlier on. She was as pleased as pie when Minnie gave her the work-basket, and then the kids remembered about the lamp-shade and turned out their pockets, and sure enough, there were the Bank-notes, fivers and tenners, so that Mr. and Mrs. Jones couldn't hardly believe their eyes.

Then Billy and Minnie tried to explain all about their adventures, but no one believed them, no more than you do, I'll be bound. But all the same the Bank-notes were good enough. Only Mr. Jones, being a sensible man and not wanting it to get round to the P.A.C. man, took them over to his cousin who was an upholsterer in Walsall and he changed them for him, only taking a shilling in the pound which wasn't too bad. And Mrs. Jones paid up all her bills, and they both began to hold up their heads again with the neighbours, and altogether things took a turn for the better, as you might say. It ended with Mr. Jones moving over to Walsall and getting a job in the upholstery line with his cousin. Only he missed the allotment.

But how Billy and Minnie grew up, and how later on they went back to the witch's house, and how they and their friends killed the old witch—for she was still going strong—and made things so that she could never come back again to Birmingham or anywhere else, that's another story and I haven't time to tell it you to-day.